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SUBJECT: DISARMAMENT OF MILITIAS OFF TO SYMBOLIC START

¶1. (U) Ivoirian government officials organized a ceremony in the town of Guiglo on May 19 to mark the resumption of the disarmament and demobilization of militias (DDM) in the volatile west of the country. At the ceremony, attended by President Gbagbo, FANCI commander General Mangou, and Acting ONUCI SRSG Abou Moussa, members of the Resistance Force of the Greater West, an umbrella group of western militias commanded by Guiglo Third Deputy Mayor Denis Maho Glofiei, turned in a reported total of 1,027 weapons. Maho symbolically handed over two weapons to Gbagbo who then gave them to Abou Moussa. Some of the weapons were later burned.

¶2. (U) Maho reportedly told the President that, "he who after this ceremony still carries a weapon does not answer to us. He will be a bandit subject to the laws of the Republic." In the days before the ceremony, according to a newspaper owned by the former ruling PDCI party, Gbagbo confident and former Defense Minister Kadet Bertin traveled in the West and told militias there that "he who does not want to turn in his weapon will be considered a bandit. And he could be treated as a bandit."

¶3. (SBU) Publicly, Abou Moussa called the handover "courageous" and "patriotic," but privately he admitted to the Ambassador that the handover was largely symbolic. Critics, for example, charged that the weapons that were turned in were old or in disrepair. (The French Ambassador commented that half the weapons were of local manufacture and the other half consisted of hunting rifles.) In addition, even though, per the Ouaga accord, ONUCI is supposed to receive weapons turned over as part of DDM and DDR, Abu Moussa said the UN had not been part of the planning for Guiglo and had in fact only been informed that the ceremony would actually take place the day before it occurred. Nevertheless, in another meeting with selected foreign Embassies, Abou Moussa praised the government's commitment to DDM and commented that "It,s a start."

¶4. (SBU) An NGO rep who attended the event, told emboff that it was the most elaborate such event that he had witnessed (he had attended two other DDM ceremonies under Prime Ministers Diarra and Banny). However, while he characterized the event as symbolically important, he allowed that there is no plan in place to proceed with real disarmament of the various militia groups in the west.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: President Gbagbo,s participation in this kickoff ceremony may mark a more serious commitment on the part of the government to proceed with DDM. However, it will have to go beyond symbolism and actually proceed with disarmament of the militias. Otherwise, the New Forces are unlikely to initiate any DDR of their own ex-combatants. As with other key aspects of the Ouaga accord, the government needs to set out a plan of action and carry it out.

HOOKS